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C O N F I D E N T I A L CURACAO 000082

DEPARTMENT PASS TO WHA/CAR; ALSO PASS TO PM/SNA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 6/24/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [SNAR](#) [NA](#) [NL](#) [AA](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PARTIES AND VENEZUELA COMPLAIN ABOUT U.S.
COUNTER-DRUG FO...

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PARTIES AND VENEZUELA COMPLAIN ABOUT U.S.
COUNTER-DRUG FORWARD OPERATING LOCATION

REF: (A) CARACAS 000695; (B) HAVANA 000462

CLASSIFIED BY: William J. Furnish, POL, ConGen Curacao, State.
REASON: 1.4 (a), (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Local opposition parties are using rising fuel prices and fears of regional conflict to attempt, unsuccessfully, to stir up popular opposition to the U.S. counter-drug Forward Operating Location (FOL). Local media reports have also highlighted recent Venezuelan government criticism of the FOL. Venezuelan air traffic controllers have threatened U.S. and allied counter-drug flights in the area, challenging U.S., French, British and Netherlands Antilles aircraft operating in international airspace. Missoffs have sought to provide friendly GONA officials with information to counter the criticisms, but we probably can expect more negative attention in the run-up to renewal of the FOL agreement, which expires in 2011. END SUMMARY

OPPOSITION SEIZES ON AIRSPACE VIOLATION TO CRITICIZE FOL

2 . (U) Leaders of Curacao's opposition parties have used the recent, alleged Venezuelan airspace violation by a USAF S-3 plane flying out of Curacao (REF. A) to attempt to stir up local fears over the presence of the U.S. Air Force counter-drug FOL here. Party leaders Nelson Pierre of the Not One Step Backwards List (PLNP) and Helmin Wiels of Sovereign People (PS) party have taken to local media to plant the idea that the U.S. is attempting to use the FOL as a staging area for military incursions into VE, and that Curacao could eventually become caught in the middle should any military action occur. The

opposition called for a public meeting on the issue in the Island Council, now set for June 24 .

BREAK AT THE PUMP FOR GIVING U.S. FOL THE BOOT?

3 . (U) This action follows recent criticism and strike action over the announcement of significant retail fuel price increases on Curacao. Opposition parties are telling the public that Venezuelan President Chavez will not consider giving Curacao a better deal on fuel as long as the FOL (which he reportedly considers a potential threat) is allowed to operate. The Curacao-owned, but Venezuelan (PdVSA)-operated, oil refinery supplies all fuel to local retailers.

WHO IS FUNDING LOCAL OPPOSITION?

4 . (C) A pro-U.S. Curacao Island Council member called on COM recently to discuss possible Venezuelan interference in this and related issues. Source informed us that he and other members of the government are concerned that the opposition parties and certain labor unions are suddenly better organized and funded, and that they plan to use the upcoming council meeting to put political pressure on the GONA, including regarding the FOL. He reported that a recent strike and public demonstration by the taxibus drivers' union over fuel prices was far more organized and coordinated than prior events. He noted especially the involvement in the strike of former GONA cabinet member and avowed Chavista Errol Cova of the now-defunct Labor People's Crusade party.

MISSOFFS REACH OUT

5 . (C) Opposition leaders will reportedly raise the Venezuelan airspace incident and try to link it with the fuel price issue at the Island Council meeting to suggest that the GONA get rid of the FOL. In an effort to help pro-U.S. officials counter the criticism, COM and the JIATF-South liaison officer briefed Island Governor and Council head Lisa Dindial, and later PM Elhage on May 25 regarding the airspace incident (using approved press guidance). Missoffs provided background information on the limited, counter-drug mission of the FOL and on its many benefits to Curacao. During the meeting with the PM, Missoffs were surprised to encounter visiting Dutch State Secretary for Kingdom Affairs Ank Bijleveld and Netherlands local representative Rob Vermaas. The PM invited them to sit in on the meeting, where they also expressed concern about possible Venezuelan interference. The Lt. Governor and PM planned to pass the FOL information to friendly island commissioners so that they can better respond to the accusations and allegations that the opposition is likely to make at the June 24 public meeting.

VENEZUELAN DRUMBEAT OF CRITICISM

16. (C) For its part, Venezuela is apparently ramping up its public criticism of the FOL and taking an increasingly aggressive posture against counter-drug flights from Curacao. In President Chavez's recent visit to Cuba, he reportedly referred, as he has previously, to the threatening U.S. military bases in Curacao and Manta, Ecuador (REF. B). Local media also report that former Venezuelan Vice President Vicente Rangel again cited the Curacao FOL as a potential threat during his weekly TV program. Other current and former Venezuelan officials have also been quoted locally as calling the FOL a threat to Venezuela.

CHALLENGES TO BRITISH, FRENCH, ANTILLEAN COUNTER-DRUG FLIGHTS

17. (C) Perhaps partly as a result of the airspace violation and high-level political attention, Venezuelan air traffic control authorities seem to be taking a more aggressive stance toward U.S. and allied counter-narcotics flights in the region. On three occasions over four days, June 14-17, we understand that Venezuelan air traffic control (ATC) at Maiquetia airport has challenged the presence of counter-narcotics aircraft operating within its Flight Information Region (FIR) but within international airspace. On these three occasions, British, French and Antillean counter-drug reconnaissance planes were told they needed Venezuelan clearance to transit the FIR. The

aircraft commanders have responded that no such clearance is necessary as they are state aircraft operating in international airspace with due regard to other traffic. In the first incident, the British pilot was told that if he entered the Venezuelan FIR again, he will be intercepted by military aircraft. A Dash-8 operated by the Netherlands Antilles Coast Guard was challenged the following day and voluntarily turned around. Finally, the French aircraft, which remained in international airspace, was reportedly shadowed for 15-20 minutes by what were apparently two unidentified Venezuelan military planes 150 miles away and flying over Venezuela on a parallel course.

WORKING-LEVEL RESPONSE SUGGESTED

18. (C) The Netherlands Antilles Foreign Affairs Directorate (FAD) called ConGen June 15 to ask about unofficial complaints from the Venezuelan ATC regarding the first of these incidents. COM corrected the claim that U.S. aircraft were involved, and encouraged the FAD to deal with the matter first at the technical, working level. COM updated the FAD Director and Deputy PM on the margins of the June 16 FOL change of command ceremony here. The FAD director, who had just returned from talks with Venezuela on the future of the Curacao refinery (run by PDVSA), agreed. He noted that similar incidents two years ago were handled on a mil-mil basis at a low level. He also predicted that the GOV would not succeed should it attempt to link the FOL to the refinery negotiations. COM also expects to discuss the issue during a visit to JIATFSouth HQ next week where he will be joined by the Governors of the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba, and the Curacao-based Dutch Commander of CTG 4.4.

9 . (C) Comment: The opposition parties, while small, have a dedicated following, mainly among working-class citizens who are already wary of Dutch influence and control. Opposition leader Nelson Pierre (a reputed former drug addict) of the PLNP is known to deliver lengthy, screaming rants on local radio shows, accusing U.S. and Dutch interests of wide-ranging conspiracies against Curacao and the region. Post suspects that some opposition leaders have links with the Venezuelan government and may receive funding from it. We expect more opposition attacks on our military presence in the runup to renewal of the FOL agreement, which expires in 2011. We will continue efforts to promote the FOL as a multinational effort to work with the Antilles (and Aruba) to combat drug trafficking, and to show the Opposition parties that there is a political cost to not supporting that fight in defense of their own people. We will also continue to highlight the FOL's counterdrug mission and success, along with its positive economic and social impact in the community, in order to influence already generally favorable public opinion.

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